Film Culture Crossover:

Film Fight Choreography and the East/West Binary After Bruce Lee

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Keywords:

Batman Begins, Bruce Lee, Rey Chow, Cultural Translation, Hollywood, Jeff Imada, Dan Inosanto, Jeet Kune Do (JKD), Keysi Fighting Method (KFM), Martial Arts Choreography, Oriental Style, Jane Park, Jacques Rancière.

Abstract:

This paper reads the emergence of 'Oriental style' in Hollywood (Park 2010) as an exemplary case of what Rey Chow calls 'cultural translation (Chow 1995). The paper explores some of the intimate yet paradoxical relationship between 'Oriental' martial arts and the drive for 'authenticity' in both film choreography and martial arts practices; plotting the trajectories of some key martial arts crossovers since Bruce Lee. It argues that, post-Bruce Lee, Western film fight choreography first moved into and then moved away from overtly Chinese, Japanese, Hong Kong or indeed obviously 'Oriental style'; a move that many have regarded as a deracination or westernisation of fight choreography. However, a closer look reveals that this apparent deracination is actually the unacknowledged rise of Filipino martial arts within Hollywood. The significance of making this point, and the point of making this kind argument overall boils down to the insight it can give us into how 'cultures' and texts are constructed, and also into our own reading practices and the roles they play, sometimes in perpetuating certain problematic ethno-nationalist discourses.

Bio:

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Deracinated Ninjas

In a chapter entitled 'An Oriental Past' in her 2010 book, *Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Cinema* (Park 2010), Jane Park begins from a consideration of a film series in which Asia / the Orient / the East is both everywhere and nowhere. The films in question are *Batman Begins* (2005) and *The Dark Knight* (2008). Park uses the films as clear examples of the extent to which clear borders between East and West have become more and more blurred within and by the aesthetic crossovers facilitated by new media technologies and the globalised discourses set up within and by them.

Specifically, Park points out, Asia is everywhere and nowhere in these films, in a number of ways. Firstly, of course, they are not Asian films: they are Hollywood films. Yet much of the first half of *Batman Begins*, in particular, and much of the aesthetic of both films is *styled* Oriental – it has an Oriental *style* or *sheen*. This is nowhere more so than in the early sequences in which Christian Bale's Bruce Wayne is trained in an isolated mountaintop temple in what Park refers to as 'ninjitsu'. Park calls it ninjitsu because the masked characters who train Bruce Wayne in martial arts in the temple, and who call themselves 'the League of Shadows', are clearly marked as ninjas, are referred to as ninjas several times within the films, and they wear a version of the traditional/mythological black masks and black costumes of ninjas, whilst training heavily in swordplay, deception, illusion, distraction, stealth and evasion. So, we might reasonably expect our ninjas to be training in what is referred to in Western popular culture as 'ninjitsu'.

But who and what and where are these ninjas? The location is not Japan. It is Himalayan/Tibetan – which seems an unusual or incongruous place for ninjas to be based. But of course, one might ask: would a ninja headquarters or training school necessarily need to be in Japan in this day and age? And would ninjas need to be Japanese? Surely such an assumption involves conflating a *practice* with an *ethnicity*. And as I want to argue here, such a conflation is precisely the kind of thing that needs to be assiduously avoided in any study of film or culture – and not least because, as these films themselves 'perform', contemporary media technologies and their discourses technologies enable, intensify, multiply and accelerate many forms of cultural crossover.

Nevertheless, it does not seem unreasonably prejudiced to note that *to be ninja* – as such – would seem fundamentally to require being part of a precise historical and social relation; one in which a defeated samurai clan has chosen not to surrender to a victorious samurai clan, or to commit suicide, but to live on, covertly, secretively, because of the existence of the other samurai clans. This is as much as to say that one cannot *be* a ninja *as such* without being part of feudal Japanese relations; and this would strongly imply being both ethnically Japanese and being located in Japan, and, of course, living in a very precise historical period, in the past. However, if we're *not* dealing with this sense of being a ninja, and if we're just dealing with being an ultra-trained assassin with a black uniform and a predilection for swordplay, then yes, such 'ninjas' will be even better stealth assassins if they are not ethnically or linguistically marked, and if they have bases and camps all over the world. But this involves a subtle change in the meaning of the word 'ninja', one that has taken place because of what Rey Chow (following Vattimo following Nietzsche) refers to as the

weakening of cultural foundations – a weakening of cultural exclusivity, borders and barriers – as a consequence of the intensification and expansion of the complexities and flows of mediated global and transnational popular culture attendant to modernity (Chow 1995: 195)

This is why, despite its technically anachronistic character, an understanding of ninjas as globalised and deracinated paid assassins with a penchant for the balletic and the bladed makes perfect sense to us today. Indeed, this is the dominant popular cultural understanding of the ninja. But we should note that, accordingly, this is a very weakened, very fluid, deracinated and mobile conception of a ninja (Chow 1995: 195). This is because, 'to be' a ninja outside of an antagonism structuring feudal Japanese society can nowadays only mean to be a *semiotic* ninja – a trace, a remainder, a leftover, a mark, or residue, in diaspora. Nevertheless, this remains a semiotics with a *currency*, a *communicability* and a *transmissibility*: an *afterlife* and an *intelligibility* (Chow 1995: 199).

Indeed, it seems likely that the image of the ninja as mobile, transnational or deracinated and globe-trotting is surely the *dominant* image *because* it maps fluidly and fluently onto the more than century-old 'yellow peril' paradigm (Seshagiri 2006). We should recall that one of the first 'yellow peril' fantasy constructions took the form of the globe-trotting Chinese arch-villain Fu Manchu in the Sax Rohmer short stories and novels, at the dawn of the twentieth century. These were inspired and structured by two diverse sources: on the one hand, Imperial worries about anti-British uprisings such as the Boxer Rebellion and, on the other hand, a desire to cash in on the successful format of the Sherlock Holmes novels. What is crucial here is

that both Sax Rohmer and subsequent yellow peril fantasists have all recognised or dramatised that what is *most* perilous about the yellow peril is not when the yellow peril is a huge mass or multitude in its 'proper place' – that is far, far away, over there, in a determinate other place in the East; but rather that the yellow peril is perilous precisely because of its (perceived or fantasy) ability to move anonymously, individually, fluidly, fluently, silently, secretly and insidiously across the globe. Fu Manchu's headquarters were in London's East End, and he and his henchmen could and would pop up all over the world (or, more specifically, all over the British Empire), at will and unexpectedly.[1]

In other words, in 'yellow peril' semiotics, *location* is *irrelevant*. Movement is primary. What is not deemed irrelevant, however – and, moreover, what is not figured as moveable – in this semiotics is *ethnicity*. What subtends and sustains such discourse, in all its forms, is a belief in the permanence of a mobile and portable ethnicity which always manifests itself as anti-Western and pro-Eastern *nationalist ideology* (Seshagiri 2006). Simply *being yellow*, no matter *where* and no matter how long you've been there, is taken as a sign of a necessary infidelity or non-belonging to the West; and an essential attachment – simply because of skin colour or ethnicity – to another place. Jane Park indicates the tenacity of the hold of this discourse – not just in popular fiction but also in serious public arenas – when she discusses news media representations of *both* ethnically Asian *criminals* and ethnically Asian *victims* of crime in the US: in the language and representational structure of US news discourse, the ethnically Asian is never *simply*, *wholly* or *wholesomely* American (Park 2010). The hyphen of hyphenated US identity politics reveals itself to be a double-edged sword (Chow 2002; Park 2010).

It is with this unclear nexus of ethnicity, alterity, location, place and crossing over – in relation not just to globalised cinema but also to embodied cultural practices – that I will be primarily concerned in the following. This is because in film and in our readings of film there are often conflations and confirmation biases at play which pull our readings in certain directions, often in ways which conform to both a geographical and what Jacques Rancière calls a *geometrical* structuring of the world (Rancière 1999), along ethnic and nationalist lines (Chow 2002). As Rancière has consistently sought to impress upon us: we fall too easily into a style of thinking in which we assume that social classes and social groups each have their *proper place* and *proper location* and *proper activities*; and, because of this aesthetic distribution of the sensible and this paradigm of viewing and apprehending, this partition of the perceptible, this shared biased commonsense, our own thought processes themselves ultimately come to work like police officers: we assume that we know *where* and *what* certain groups, identities and practices *are* or should be, and we push them back into their perceived *proper places* – or, when we apprehend them or think about them or represent them or engage with them, we measure the distance between where they seem to be and where we thought and think they *should* be (Rancière 1999). This is a process that Rey Chow has called 'coercive mimeticism' (Chow 2002); coercive mimeticism being a term for any of the many processes through which ethnic, class and gendered identities are assumed, imposed, enforced, insisted upon and adjudicated, in myriad contexts. My argument here will be that looking closely and thinking about the relations between ethnicity and the perhaps surprising topic of martial arts film fight choreography offers important insights into all of this.

Choreographing Authenticity

In the context of the ninjas of *Batman Begins*, and of the film's 'ninjitsu', a moment's digging around or researching (if watching YouTube 'making of' clips can yet be called 'research'!) – reveals that it is actually the case that the choreography we see in the film is derived from a martial art called Keysi Fighting Method (KFM). This martial art was invented or baptised and institutionalised within the last few decades by a street-fighter from Barcelona (called Justo Dieguez Serrano) in conjunction with another from Hull in the north of England (called Andy Norman). These two fighters met on what Norman refers to as 'the circuit': a martial arts circuit made up of a loose network of like-minded martial artists who would travel widely around the world to train with each other at various training camps (not entirely unlike our deracinated ninjas, perhaps). Another of these like-minded fighters was a man – also from Hull – called Buster Reeves: a former sports martial arts star, freestyle sparring champion, world jujitsu champion, and stuntman who, at a certain point in time – exactly when he was a student of Andy Norman in Hull – was lined up to be the stunt body-double for none other than Christian Bale in the up-coming film which turned out to be *Batman Begins*.[2]

So, the fighting method of the Orientalised yet non-Japanese (or non-Japan-located) 'ninjas', located in an apparently ancient temple somewhere far, far away, but definitely in the East, in this Hollywood film, turns out to be a very contemporary and avowedly 'urban' martial art; one that was invented, formalised and codified – or at least baptised and commodified – by two Europeans, who met on an international

training circuit but who insist that KFM 'comes from the street', or, at least, is *designed for* 'the street'. In any case, KFM became connected with Hollywood thanks to a certain international network of fighters, all of whom were striving for *authenticity* in their martial arts training. As Andy Norman and others say in interviews about *Batman Begins* (and elsewhere), KFM strives for authenticity and efficiency; it is not hampered by somebody else's tradition; it is not, to paraphrase Andy Norman, an ancient residual form of someone else's truth; it is rather a truth that they themselves worked out in the here and now, through an unending process of thinking, researching, experimentation, testing and verification.

Now, to anyone familiar with martial arts rhetoric – that is, with the range and styles of types of things that martial artists are going to choose to say about their practice – it is very hard not to discern close family resemblances between KFM-style discourse and the rhetoric and discourse of Jeet Kune Do as it came out of the mouth of Bruce Lee in the late 1960s and very early 70s (Bowman 2010). For Bruce Lee, martial arts practice should not be about respecting tradition and doctrine; it should always be about experimentation and innovation and, as he was wont to say, 'honestly expressing yourself'. Thus, given the virtually identical style of rhetoric and discourse shared by Bruce Lee's JKD and today's KFM, it is clear that KFM is a contemporary manifestation of an impulse that was first defined by Bruce Lee's inventive, experimental interdisciplinary research programme that he called JKD.

Of course, Keysi Fighting Method and Bruce Lee's Jeet Kune Do (or KFM and JKD) may seem very different in appearance and execution. Where Lee's JKD would insist on the straight and the direct – the straight right lead or the direct finger jab to the

eyes being its exemplary techniques – KFM is more likely to use diagonally delivered 'hammer-fist' techniques and to spin and roll into positions of ultra-close proximity in order to deliver elbow strikes and other close in techniques – this is because the 'pensador' or 'thinking-man' defensive/aggressive stance is what its founders call 'the nucleus' of its approach. So Bruce Lee's JKD and today's KFM *look* different but they share the same experimentalist, verificationist ethos, drive for efficiency and belief in 'honesty'.

What is more, both were catapulted into the spotlight by a connection with Hollywood cinema. What is (even) more: Both look and seem Oriental – the orient is all over them; they are marked Asian – yet neither is properly Oriental or simply Asian: KFM appears in the recent *Batman* films *as if it is ninjitsu*, but it is not; JKD appeared both in Bruce Lee's pre-Hollywood supporting role in *Longstreet* in 1967 and also in his unfinished film *Game of Death* (1973/1978), *as if it were 'kung fu'*, and it was always heavily marked as Asian, as Chinese; but it is not: *not really; not simply*. Even Bruce Lee himself at times wanted to distance himself from an ethno-nationalist interpretation of what he was doing in JKD: In *Game of Death* (unfinished in 1973, released in cobbled-together form in 1978), Lee chose to wear a bright yellow tracksuit, so that his style could not be semiotically attached to any existing formal style from any culture. And, ultimately, JKD is a Chinese name for an art born in the USA out of Lee's interdisciplinary explorations in boxing, fencing, grappling, wrestling, and kicking, from a Wing Chun basis – but a basis that became more and more translated and transformed over time, so that only certain axioms of Wing Chun remained (as expressed in sentiments about the centreline and about the immoveable elbow, and so on).

In other words, both JKD and KFM are heavily marked as Oriental; both are semiotically constructed as Oriental; but in the approach of Bruce Lee, to regard JKD simply as Chinese is to conflate *Lee's own ethnicity*, on the one hand, and his *deracinated interdisciplinary radicalism*, on the other; and to do so in such a way as to make the *ethnicity* trump the *activity*: in other words, it is to assume that *because Lee looked Chinese, therefore what he did was Chinese*. This sort of conflation is as legitimate as claiming that because *Batman Begins* constructs KFM as ninjitsu, therefore KFM is Japanese. In other words, this all points to a problem of culture; one that raises its obscure – or obscured – or black-masked – head, whenever there is a crossover. This is especially visible when the crossover involves or is enabled by cinematic mediation or mediatization.

In Authentic Crossing

Jane Park argues that in many manifestations of Hollywood's cinematic imaginary – in its semiotic vernacular – 'the Orient' stands simultaneously for the ancient past *and* the technological or technologized future. She argues that in the recent *Batman* films, East and West are blurred. I want to emphasise the ways in which the Orient is both played and erased here and elsewhere, in order to show the deconstruction of location – and of certain conceptions of 'culture' – through the problematization of space and location attendant to international film.

According to the 'making-of' interviews and short films that circulate on YouTube about *Batman Begins*, the consensus is that Keysi Fighting Method was noticed by

and incorporated into the film largely because of its visual novelty: as one of the interviewees – the fight and stunt coordinator David Forman – puts it: we'd seen kung fu, we'd seen taekwondo, we'd seen jujitsu; but we hadn't seen *this* before. So: KFM offered a novel visual spectacle boiling down to a new and flowing style of movement, one that they decided suited the character and personality they were giving to Batman in the film: brutal, animalistic, pugilistic, almost crude in appearance, yet at the same time highly viewable and ultra-slick. According to Andy Norman, the co-founder of KFM, what the filmmakers liked about the look of KFM was that it showed a new way of moving; a way of moving never seen in fight choreography before.[3]

Because of this, in the wake of *Batman Begins*, Keysi Fighting Method started to become global. (It is also seen in *Mission Impossible 3*.) This take-off itself is a new version of the same mediatized route that first made all nominally Oriental martial arts global: David Carradine and Bruce Lee introduced nominally Chinese martial arts quite decisively to the West; and off the back of this mediation, untold numbers of people all over the world started practicing nominally or actually Chinese, Japanese and Korean arts, first of all, and an increasingly diverse range of national martial arts subsequently – Brazilian jujitsu and capoeira, in particular.

In relation to the exemplary case that is Bruce Lee: it is fair to say that it was *only* because of his celebrity status that Jeet Kune Do became known. Then, as people looked backwards in time, through Bruce Lee's biography, ever-desirous to return to the source or the mythic origin of Lee's art, so to speak, more and more people discovered Wing Chun. Accordingly, one can say: it was only because of Bruce Lee

that the art he studied as a teenager, Wing Chun, became popular outside of Hong Kong. By the same token, it was only because of Bruce Lee that his teacher, Yip Man, became so well known that he has since been reclaimed and reconstructed as a legendary Chinese patriot within some recent Hong Kong produced films (See Bowman 2013 for further discussion of this).

To put it bluntly: virtually no one would have heard about kung fu were it not for Bruce Lee; no one would be doing Jeet Kune Do; Wing Chun would be insignificant outside (and possibly within) Hong Kong, and Yip Man would be equally unheard of. I say this without any disrespect intended to any of these people or styles. I just want to emphasise the crucial role of film in producing visibilities, mythologies, beliefs and practices. In fact, there is a sense in which almost every martial art or martial artist today could be said to have a debt to cinema (no matter how unwanted), and could also be said to be involved in a mediatized practice, no matter how anti-spectacular the martial art is. This is the case *even* with Bruce Lee's JKD and with KFM (not to mention MMA and UFC), and even in the face of their shared and avowed commitment to *authenticity* and *reality* (Bowman 2010; Bowman 2013).

For, with both, it is the case that an art that was inspired and guided by the desire for the real and the authentic has been mediatized, and in that mediatization glamorized, and in that glamorization further commodified. So, now, even if you can't find an actual human instructor in KFM, you can sign up and download the syllabus – white belt, yellow belt, and so on, through to black. And these training videos are themselves pretty slick and groovy textual productions: finely crafted and beautifully edited films which emphasise the different ways to train in order to practice to

simulate and emulate and generate authenticity – or the effects and features of authenticity – in training for real and authentic combat. So, pretty soon there should be plenty of virtually-produced but real KFM certified instructors to set up physically-located schools.

In itself, this is no big deal. There have long been correspondence courses. And far be it from me to fetishize the value of the face-to-face co-presence of teacher and student. (Derrida deconstructed this decisively decades ago (Derrida 1981).) Rather, the point I would like to make is to caution the conflation of text with geographical location, or geographical location with ethnicity and/or 'culture'.

National Geographethnicity

Rey Chow nails one problem of this tendency in her 1993 book, *Writing Diaspora* (Chow 1993). In this book, Chow points out the ways that, in American universities in particular, the academic world is all too easily divided up *geographically*. That is to say, academic departments and academic approaches are divided up along nation-state lines, in a way that actually mirrors – and yet obscures – the geopolitical organisation of the world. It mirrors it in that a school or department can be, for example, a school of Chinese studies. In this school or department, there will be experts in so many areas of this geographical entity's social and cultural landscape: for example, Chinese literature, Chinese language, Chinese history, Chinese philosophy, and so on. In the next building or somewhere across the campus, there will be the Japanese counterpart of this; elsewhere the Russian and Slavic and elsewhere the Indian and so on and so forth – in a way in which the geopolitical

identity of nation states is mirrored in the academic division of labour. (There may also be – as there is in my own university, for instance – schools of European Studies. But such schools and departments are less likely to teach European Philosophy than they are to teach the unmodified and putatively universal discipline of capital-p-Philosophy – in other words, the supposedly *universal* category or version of a subject; a universal or transcendent version of a subject, whose 'universality' is of course merely the simultaneous acknowledgement and disavowal of its Eurocentrism.)

The reiteration of geographical or geopolitical (or, in other words: national) boundaries as a way to organise universities, their departments and schools, their disciplinary landscapes, and ultimately therefore the knowledge they produce, has many consequences. For instance, Chow draws attention to the likelihood that translated Chinese texts dealing with, for example, women or the family or the state will all too often be given a modifier in translation, so that, in their English language versions they become, all of a sudden, texts dealing not with 'woman' or the family or the state but now with *Chinese* women, the *Chinese* family and the *Chinese* state – and in a precisely diametrically opposite way to the way in which European texts about the same subjects would be translated. Chow proposes that a French language text called, say, *la femme, la famille, l'état*, would almost certainly be translated as something much closer to *woman, the family, the state* than *French women, the French family and the French state* (Chow 1993 :6). Of film itself, Chow says: let's

contrast titles of studies of 'first-world' film with titles of studies of non-'first-world' film. While the former typically adopt generic theoretical markers such

as 'the imaginary signifier', 'the cinematic apparatus', 'feminism', 'gender', 'desire', 'psychoanalysis', 'semiotics', 'narrative', 'discourse', 'text', 'subjectivity', and 'film theory', the latter usually must identify their topics by the names of ethnic groups or nation-states, such as 'black cinema', 'Latin-American cinema', 'Israeli cinema', 'Brazilian cinema', 'Japanese cinema', 'Indian cinema', 'Spanish cinema', 'Chinese cinema', 'Hong Kong cinema', and so forth. To the same extent, it has been possible for Western film critics to produce studies of films from cultures whose languages they do not know, whereas it is inconceivable for non-Western critics to study the French, German, Italian, and Anglo-American cinemas without knowing their respective languages. (Chow 1995: 27)

Whether this all remains so stark 18 to 20 and more years after Chow first made these arguments in 1993 and 1995 is debatable. However, the point is that Chow points to the hierarchies of value involved in organising knowledge *geographically*. The problem is both that this can too easily take place against the backdrop of an assumed universality – capital-p-Philosophy (as universal) versus 'Eastern Thought' (as regional), for example – and also that this type of thinking follows an implicit Cold War, Orientalist, imperialist or colonialist logic, in which the *other* culture is there to be known in the form of a data-mine or, ultimately, *a target* (Chow 2006).

Anthropology is a residue of British imperialism, it is often said: the natives are objects, curios, relics from the past, specimens from nature, to be studied by the modern Western investigator. Area Studies, it is also said, is a disciplinary field that is a direct product of the post-Second World War and Cold War US mindset, elaborated in accordance with the injunction to 'know your enemy'. Such a

geographical imaginary – when it organises academic work – is both politically consequential in one way and also depoliticising in another. Edward Said names it 'Orientalism', of course (Said 1995); and I feel confident that I do not need to give readers a long account of Orientalism. But what deserves to be noted is that one consequence of the regionalisation of knowledge according to national borders is its generation of essentialism. And one problem with essentialism – as much as it can be shown to be politically consequential in any number of 'political' ways – is that it is also depoliticizing, in that it works to reinforce the idea that national cultures, with their histories and their languages, organised by borders, are expressions of a cultural essence; with culture regarded as a treasure trove of history to be revered. In this framework, only the past is authentic. The past is superior. The present is corrupt. And specific cultural studies of specific cultures become inclined to evaluate contemporary cultural productions in terms of how well they fare against the values imputed to the past. This has a range of inevitable or overdetermined consequences. One is that it transforms the very definition of, say, literature, or music or art – moving engagement with these things away from assessing individual works in terms of their critical force or transformative intervention into culture or political discourse, and demanding instead that works be assessed in terms of the extent to which they can be regarded as an expression of an authentic (ancient) culture. In such paradigms, as Chow repeatedly points out, contemporary art in any realm is inevitably doomed to fail to live up to the past/the authentic, because of the fact that it is contemporary and alive and therefore 'corrupted' by the present complexity of the interconnected, ever-crossing-over world.

Regionality

But, now we approach a paradox. For, on the one hand, it is possible to deconstruct the idea of regional cultures and regional practices and regional texts, like film, because everything is increasingly transnational – for instance, in film financing, film distribution, film production teams, film values, film talent, and so on. But on the other hand, there are *obviously* regional film industries and histories and institutions and realities. So, how are we to engage with the ongoing reality of this self-evident regionality? If we ignore it on the basis of its complicity with either Orientalist or imperialist or otherwise nationalist discourses and processes, are we not ignoring a significant political fact about regional film? After all, doesn't even a cultural theorist like Rey Chow, who prominently problematizes regionalising perspectives, herself write entire books about Chinese film, even as she points to pitfalls and problems of nationalising film studies and essentializing cultures along nationalistic lines and within Eurocentric and colonial conceptual universes? So, if we want to listen to Chow and learn a lesson from Chow, how then do we negotiate the paradox opened by two of her key cautions – first, the caution against falling into the 'area studies trap', of nationalising, homogenizing and essentializing culture along national and ethnic lines (Chow 1993; Chow 1998); while, second, treating film as ethnography, as she also proposes (Chow 1995)?

Chow herself resolves the paradox of her twin yet apparently contradictory injunctions – on the one hand, *do not ethnographize film*; but on the other hand, *approach film as ethnography* – by elaborating what we now too easily call a deconstruction of the notion of both ethnography and – ultimately – of translation, and specifically of what she calls cultural translation.

This is not *simply* a deconstruction because although she certainly deconstructs ethnography and anthropology, she does not really 'deconstruct' translation or cultural translation. In actual fact, she turns Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man's own deconstructions of translation against them in order to show the limitations of their approach, or rather, the points at which they stop. She does this to show that what she calls the negative impulse – the rigorous but negative critical energy of deconstruction – cannot really engage with the specificity of the film medium itself. And this is the important task, she argues: because this is where the action is.

To say that Chow doesn't deconstruct is not quite right, however. She definitely advocates the need to deconstruct nativism, primitivism, regionalism, ethno-nationalism, and so on. She certainly wants to deconstruct the tacit idea that there is an original text, for instance; or, more than that: an original *before* any particular text; *an original that the text is trying to represent, communicate, or indeed 'translate'*. This is why she regularly points to the criticisms levelled against globally successful filmmakers such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou – in order to show the ways that most of the criticisms made against these directors are based on the idea that their textual productions are unfaithful representations of some true depth and essence of China. Ultimately, she suggests, such criticisms are based on a self-essentializing which follows from a belief that there is an essence or an underlying truth to China that needs to be (yet cannot fully be) translated with accuracy and fidelity into filmic form.

But every text is a construct, Chow reminds us: *Every* text. And this includes the pre-text of a nation, such as China. So Chow certainly deconstructs the idea and relation of original to copy. But she takes her leave from deconstruction when she notices that the readings of the deconstructionists are so much orientated towards the past (at least the etymological past) and hence towards some sense of the prior and original – even if deconstruction also shows that the original text is a failed or incomplete or unsutured text. The point, for Chow, lies in the orientation towards the past as such. For such an orientation means that, even though the deconstructionists deconstruct the original text, they still believe in it, and look to the past to find it.

This is a problem for Chow, for lots of reasons, but mainly because if one orientates one's reading towards the past then the present is always going to look like an inferior, corrupt and bad copy: a bad translation. So, instead of going down this line, Chow insists, one needs always to remember that even the putative original is always and already an unoriginal construction, a *fragment* made up of fragments. As such, one should orientate one's reading or valuation of it in terms of its effects on and within the present. In going down this line, Chow foregrounds the work of Walter Benjamin.

Cultural Translation

The key moment in Chow's elaboration of a theory of cultural translation comes when she quotes a long passage of Walter Benjamin quoting Rudolph Pannwitz. Pannwitz writes, as Benjamin and Chow both point out:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. . . . The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. (pp. 80-81) [Quoted in Chow 1995: 188-9]

It may be harder to see or imagine what this might mean in written language or literary culture than it is to see what it might mean in film language and visual culture. Indeed, perhaps it is *easy* to see the ways that not only the supposed 'best' but also even the (arguable) 'worst' films deftly, happily, joyously and fluidly translate from one film language to another, from one genre to another, from one regional semiotic or technical vernacular to another. In other words, what I am arguing here is that you see this sort of cultural translation *all the time*, in films in which an importation (a copy from or of an 'origin') intervenes into and modifies a milieu (a 'destination', a context, a present). Such interventions or translations or crossovers are inevitably in one sense unfaithful betrayals of a former state, but equally – as Chow concludes – in another sense they are respectful reiterations and animating breaths of new life, even if that life is a transformation, an afterlife.

Specifically, then, this suggests that a film like *Batman Begins* is best approached not in terms of a paradigm of *simple appropriation* (according to the paradigm of Orientalism) but in terms of a thinking of *cultural translation.* The film is certainly an index of the effects that the translation of Oriental style into Hollywood continues to have in film. But if we think of it as an appropriation or an implicitly unjust expropriation of something quintessentially Oriental, I think that we are sentencing ourselves to operate according to problematic assumptions about culture as *property* or *underlying essence* rather than *process* or *productive event.*

Of course, features of this process do also indicate the extent to which Western discourses often seek to appropriate and to claim ownership and mastery of practices that might more organically be connected with other cultures. Gary Krug, for instance, has written a fascinating study of the American appropriation of Okinawan karate – a long discursive process, he lays out, which culminates in events like the peculiar case of an America-based martial arts association expressing outrage and refusing to recognize the authority of Okinawan and Japanese martial artists in the same style to award the highest dan-grades without the consent of the US association. In other words, the US-based association bearing the name of a formerly and concurrently Okinawan martial art now regards itself as holding the ultimate authority and being the sole institution with the power to award the grade of tenth dan to anyone. The Okinawan practitioners are regarded by the American association as no longer able to legislate on their own activities (Krug 2001).

So crossovers do often entail 'appropriations' or crossings-out and discursive controversies. There was always controversy at the heart of Bruce Lee's crossings-

over, from Hong Kong to Hollywood in film and from Wing Chun to Jun Fan to Jeet Kune Do in martial arts (Bowman 2010). Moreover, a potent factor in the case of Bruce Lee is that at the pinnacle – the explosion – the crossroads – of Lee's crossover, he died. Lee died one month before the US cinematic release of the film that 'made' his name truly global, *Enter the Dragon* (1973). Consequently, in the wake of his untimely demise, Hollywood hungered for more Oriental or Oriental-esque martial choreography. More importantly, it hungered not just for any old exotic choreography, but specifically for more of the Bruce Lee style of authenticity in choreography: the fast, the ferocious, and the beautiful; not the robotic rhythms of kata; but the *believable spectacle* (the *unbelievable-believable*) of apparent authenticity.

There were always a range of styles of martial choreographies on offer (Hunt 2003). But one style rose to dominance, trampolining to prominence especially but not solely after the entrance into film of Bruce Lee's son, Brandon. Brandon Lee had studied Jeet Kune Do under Bruce Lee's friend and student, Dan Inosanto. Moreover, Brandon studied JKD along with his own friend and contemporary, Jeff Imada. And Jeff Imada, who was working in the film industry, in stunt and action sequences, helped out prominently with the action in Brandon Lee's own films. Imada then went on to become the stunt and fight choreographer for an ever-growing list of Hollywood films.

What this means is that it is possible to trace a strong connection between – and a largely untold story of – Hollywood fight choreography *in general* and *Dan Inosanto's* school of Jeet Kune Do. And one thing that is particularly under-

acknowledged in this regard is the fact that, whilst Bruce Lee preached interdisciplinarity and innovation in martial arts research, he also always insisted that Dan Inosanto himself should respect and champion the martial arts of his own parent culture – the Philippines (a place that Inosanto himself is not actually from). Accordingly, Inosanto has always studied and championed a wide range of martial arts of the Philippines.

Even less widely acknowledged is the extent to which it is these Filipino arts – specifically Filipino Kali and Eskrima – that we see depicted in film after film after film from Hollywood. A multitude of Hollywood films with the most memorable martial arts choreography have involved Jeff Imada in choreographing role. And what is perhaps most peculiar about many of the films – films that could be said to be full of Filipino martial arts – is the extent to which the choreography within them is represented *as if it is non-Eastern, as if it is entirely deracinated*, connected with either 'the US military', 'special forces' or 'the street' – specifically, of course, the US street. There is little if any mention or acknowledgement of the Filipino connection – of the fact that these putatively deracinated, universal, logical, rational, Western martial arts – as best seen in *The Bourne Identity* trilogy (2002, 2004, 2007), for instance, is neither simply universal nor simply US, but rather Filipino.

But what about *Batman Begins*? The founders of KFM are adamant that their art comes 'from the street', and that it is 'for the street'. What they neglect to mention nowadays is that these selfsame founders of KFM, who choreographed *Batman Begins*, are also – or were formerly – qualified instructors of Dan Inosanto's school of Jeet Kune Do. This is a branch of JKD which is, as mentioned above, heavily

informed by Filipino Kali. And a quick look at the current appearance of KFM shows it to be, in many respects, very much like that of Filipino Kali.

There is a lot that could be said about this. One possible interpretation would be the 'Westernisation thesis': the Western *appropriation* of Eastern cultural practices. Another approach would be to think about the types of transaction and translation that are taking place between 'Eastern' and 'Western' cultures: whereas the cinematic choreographies of the 1970s and 1980s focused on the regional characteristics of different arts, martial arts choreographies are increasingly regionally or ethnically blurred, even if they involve East-West cultural transactions and translations. The 'winds' that are blowing here are not following the same course as they once were, between Hong Kong and Hollywood and back again. Now there appears to be some kind of movement between Hollywood and the Philippines, but via two instrumental American-born, American-living, American-working but ethnically-Asian martial artist choreographers (Dan Inosanto and Jeff Imada). This movement now proceeds according to what we might call a less straightforward, less visible and less regionally-specifiable crossover.

Another thing of note is the problematic double-status of the martial arts formerly known as Filipino: on the one hand, they are clearly a dominant force, one that is arguably hegemonic within Hollywood action choreography; but on the other hand, as this 'ethnicity' is largely unknown or unrepresented, and because what aficionados might recognize as Filipino is not *marked* as Filipino and is depicted instead as if it is the height of rational US military or street efficiency, then Filipino martial arts might be regarded as simply the most exploited work force or work horse in town. In either

case, whether 'hegemonization' or 'exploitation', this new formation has clearly involved a crossing out or erasing of an earlier ethnic or cultural identity.

But does it matter? Am I an ambassador for Filipino martial arts, wanting to right the wrong of under-acknowledgement, or wanting to right the historical record by publicising the cultural lineage of the martial arts choreography? I am not. But the point of all of this is neither just nit-picking or being pedantic for the sake of it, nor for the sake of raising consciousness or awareness. The point is rather to draw attention to the *processuality* of culture and to the *constitutive* character not just of the textual productions – the cultural translations – but also the often unpredictable, often overdetermined nature of the networks that are constructed before, around and in the wake of them. As Fredric Jameson once said of the postmodern condition: in facing it, we must resist the temptation to judge it good or bad; because to judge it is a category mistake: It's just the way it is. Traditions, networks and relations are now constitutively mediated and mediatized. Cultures no longer have self-evident and self-identical layers, depths, surfaces and properties. Instead of *properties* cultures are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed through *proper-ties* and *improper-ties*: connections, linkages, articulations and reticulations. As Ernesto Laclau once put it, writing in the context of political theory:

> [We] gain very little, once identities are conceived as complexly articulated collective wills, by referring to them through simple designations such as classes, ethnic groups and so on, which are at best names for transient points of stabilization. The really important task, is to understand the logics of their

constitution and dissolution, as well as the formal determinations of the spaces in which they interrelate. (Laclau in Butler, Laclau et al. 2000: 53)

In the face of the globality of the 'space' of the cinematic apparatus, Jane Park is absolutely right to focus on the blurring and crossing over of Oriental and Western styles. This is not to say that there are not still regionally organised and regionally marked works and cultures. But it is to point out that neither 'East Asian' cinema nor 'Western' cinema nowadays remain in their supposed 'proper place' or exist and operate in ways organised by their erstwhile 'proper ties'. Today, any and all cinema, any and all cultural practices, can be understood as immanent contact zone and potential site of cultural translation and transformation, precisely because of the ineradicable intrusions of what Derrida would call the supplements of new media technologies. Mediatization is now at the heart of so many cultural crossovers that region, space, location, ethnicity and identity should now all be approached as cross-cut, cross-hatched, crossed-over, cross-fertilized, crossed out and underlined, in ways that should oblige the study of both visual culture and physical/embodied culture to blow the cover of any conflation of culture, identity, value or significance with nation, location, language, ethnicity and other essences.

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Filmography

Batman Begins (2005) Christopher Nolan, USA

Bourne Identity, The (2002) Doug Liman, USA

Bourne Supremacy, The (2004) Paul Greengrass, USA

Bourne Ultimatum, The (2007) Paul Greengrass, USA

Dark Knight, The (2008) Christopher Nolan, USA

Enter the Dragon (1973), Robert Clouse, HK-USA

Game of Death (1973/1978) Bruce Lee, HK-USA

Notes

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[1] The most recent iteration of the Fu Manchu figure was, of course, the media representation of Osama bin Laden after 9/11: Bin Laden was cast as a Fu Manchu character who seemed to be able to be everywhere and nowhere, apparently at will, and to be able to command hordes of minions and henchmen...

[2] Interview with Andy Norman on The Martial Edge website: http://www.martialedge.com/articles/interviews-question-and-answers/andy-norman-of-keysi-fighing-method-kfm/

[3] Interview with Andy Norman on The Martial Edge website: http://www.martialedge.com/articles/interviews-question-and-answers/andy-norman-of-keysi-fighing-method-kfm/